

## The Great Experiment

| BY JONATHAN B. JARVIS |

**EVEN THOUGH IT HAS BEEN** nearly three years, I have not recovered from the Discovery 2000 Conference, and I am not sure I ever will. I was merely an attendee, not an organizer, of this event that brought together visionaries from inside and outside the parks. And though I did present a few sessions, they hardly account for my continued angst. What I am still reeling from is the charge laid at the feet of the National Park Service by several prominent speakers: It is our task to make this great experiment in democracy succeed. | **I HAD TO TAKE A WALK** after hearing that, and think about it. Who, us? We are just “parkies.” We tell people where the restrooms are. We shore-up old buildings and keep dogs on the leash (sometimes). We count birds, pull weeds, accession arrowheads, and clean toilets. We chase speeders, build parking lots and trail bridges. We rescue lost children and fight fires. What does that all have to do with democracy? We design exhibits and tell compelling stories about people of the past. We write brochures and erect signs; we prepare films and lead tours, to let people know what happened here and why it matters to them. We make no judgments. But are we more than just the sum of our parts and our daily duties? This is the question posed by our speakers. | **IT HAS TAKEN ME** some time but I have come to understand, and even embrace, with some trepidation, the challenge placed at our feet at Discovery 2000. To put it another way, why would a new American citizen, recently immigrated to the United States and having taken the oath of U.S. citizenship, need to visit Gettysburg or Yorktown? Does he or she really care about the details of Pickett’s charge across the cornfields, or Cornwallis’ surrender to General Washington, or should he or she visit because it is here that the fires of democracy raged, American blood was shed, and today he or she can enjoy the freedoms of our society? The fact that these great places of history, and their associated resources and stories, have been placed in our care by the U.S. Congress carries with it a great responsibility beyond mere caretaking. | **IN OUR CARE** are the places where our democratic society has evolved, exploded, retreated, and raged. They are the places of great inspiration and great pain: Independence Hall, Selma to Montgomery, the Statue of Liberty, Manzanar, Rosie the

Riveter, Nicodemus, Mount Rushmore, and Nez Perce. The National Park Service has all of these places, but many more are in the care of States, counties, cities, and nonprofits. We are in this together, because the aggregate of these places and the stories that they embody create the foundation of our democracy. It is incumbent upon us, as the stewards, to make that connection. | **THIS CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY** is at the feet of all of us who are engaged in the noble work of park management and protection. Our professional stewardship of these places will guarantee that they are available for the public of today as well as the children of tomorrow. Our intellectual and scholarly pursuit of the past shines an increasingly bright light on the compelling stories of the

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people who shaped our lives by their actions and sacrifices. Our unbiased interpretation allows the public to form their own opinions and by doing so, practice the American freedom of thought and action. Our staunch requirement for authenticity and high standards for preserving cultural resources ensures that the public will encounter the real thing, or nothing at all, engenders a unique niche in the world of public attractions. And our commitment to future generations brings us to work day after day, with renewed dedication to a noble cause. | **IF THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY** is truly in the hands of the stewards of America’s parks, I can think of no one better, and I will sleep well tonight.

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